

REANIMATING THE ENGLISH HISTORICAL NOVEL IN THE TWENTY-
FIRST CENTURY – THE CASE OF DAVID MITCHELL’S
THE THOUSAND AUTUMNS OF JACOB DE ZOET

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that David Mitchell’s novel *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (2010) represents a new variation of the genre of historical fiction. The historical novel in Britain has risen to prominence since the 1980s and in the twenty-first century this strong interest in the past continues. Placing David Mitchell’s book in the context of recent historical fiction, the article takes account of Joseph Brooker’s hypothesis that, together with Hilary Mantel’s Tudor novels, *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* may be indicative of an emergent trend in the contemporary English historical novel. The purpose of the article is to identify and explore Mitchell’s key strategies of writing about history. It is argued that, departing from the prevalent mode of historiographic metafiction, Mitchell’s book adheres to some of the traditional tenets of the genre while achieving the Scottian aim of animating the past in innovative ways. The analysis leads to the conclusion that the use of the present tense, the subjective perspectives, and the exclusion of foreknowledge lend the novel dramatic qualities.

Keywords: David Mitchell; historical novel; twenty-first century English literature; time in narrative; genre.

1. The novelty of the historical novel

In his 1971 study of the English historical novel Avrom Fleishman contended: “The historical novel of our time will probably join the experimental movement of the modern novel or retire from the province of serious literature. Like history

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itself the historical novel must be more than its past, passing freely into new possibilities, or remain a sterile repetition of the forms doled out to it from tradition” (1971: 35). With the benefit of hindsight, it is evident that at the time of this prognostication the historical novel was on the brink of evolving into forms which ensured not only its survival but a remarkable and massive re-entry into the domain of “serious literature”. At the turn of the twenty-first century, a number of critics took note of what A. S. Byatt described as “the sudden flowering of the historical novel in Britain” (2001: 9). Writing in 1999, Tony E. Jackson suggested that “the turn to history as a theme may be the definitive element in British fiction of the last three decades” (1999: 172).

The preoccupation with the past continues. Today, the observation that recent decades have witnessed “a remarkable recrudescence” of the historical novel (Rousselot 2014: 1) has become a critical axiom. Suzanne Keen speaks of a “historical turn” in British and anglophone fiction (2006: 167), dating it back to the 1980s. Joseph Brooker is inclined to locate the origins of the revival of historical fiction in the success and impact of John Fowles’s postmodern neo-Victorian novel *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (2015: 161–162). Keen likewise acknowledges Fowles’s book as one of the inspirations behind the recent radical modifications of the genre. Other seminal titles, in her analysis, include Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, and these, in her opinion, collectively inspired a new kind of historical fiction and heralded a rejuvenation of the genre in the late twentieth century (Keen 2006: 171–173).

In shifting its focus from a representation of the past to the problem of representation itself, the new historical writing, on the one hand, responded to the constructivist historiographic theories (Hayden White) and, on the other, aligned itself with the postmodern trend in contemporary literature. Historical novels began to seriously explore the process of narrativising the past, the (un)reliability of sources and witnesses; they would employ multiple perspectives or divert from linearity in order to expose the strategies involved in constructing – as opposed to *reconstructing* – a narrative of what had happened. Furthermore, the questioning of the established versions of the past naturally prompted re-visions and re-writings, which included critical, intertextual engagement with past fiction. The metafictionality in late twentieth-century historical novels was occasionally paralleled by overt reflections on history as a process and a close scrutiny of historians’ methodology. “The renaissance of the historical novel”, as Byatt observed, “coincided with a complex selfconsciousness about the writing of history itself” (2001: 9). A number of books published in the 1980s and 1990s revolve around research into the past (Suzanne Keen termed such books “romances of the archive”²).

² Her explication of the term as well as her analysis of contemporary novels illustrative of this

Hence, paradoxically, a genre which had traditionally followed the model established by Walter Scott and which already appeared old-fashioned at the beginning of the twentieth century, found itself at the forefront of modern experimentation. Linda Hutcheon coined the term “historiographic metafiction” for self-reflexive historical fiction and famously declared it to be a quintessential postmodernist genre (1988: 5). In his 2010 overview of historical fiction Jerome de Groot asserts that “the techniques of postmodernism ... have become the techniques of the modern historical novel” (2010: 108). As Fleishman correctly anticipated, the historical novel owes its current high critical acclaim to the fact that it has opened up to new possibilities by accommodating some of the formal innovations of modern fiction.

Insofar as the historical novel is a fairly inclusive genre, critics as a rule refer to the model created by Scott in order to measure novelty in historical fiction. Elisabeth Wesseling observes that “[t]o qualify postmodernist adaptations of historical materials as innovations of the historical novel is to relate contemporary literary phenomena to a generic model which dates from almost two centuries earlier” (1991: 17). Taking account of the rapid evolution of the historical novel in the past few decades, Suzanne Keen distinguished between traditional historical fiction, formally akin to Walter Scott’s novels (“residual” and “dominant” types³), and postmodern, formally innovative fiction,⁴ which in her view is the “emergent” type of historical novel (2006: 173–177). Concurring with Keen with regard to what he himself describes as the “reanimation” of historical writing, and agreeing that it must be attributed to the emergence of historiographic metafiction, Joseph Brooker also distinguishes thematic revisionism as a second, parallel and often overlapping tendency. For a number of contemporary writers the reason for revisiting the past is the possibility of reassessing it from modern points of view by recovering unheard voices, marginalised perspectives, or rectifying supposed errors and omissions in accounts of the past (Brooker 2015: 169–173).⁵ Drawing on similar observations, Elodie Rousselot has recognised a “neo-historical” sub-genre of contemporary historical fiction; this category comprises novels which are “not solely set in the past, but conduct an active interrogation of that past” (Rousselot 2014: 2). Rousselot perceives a difference between this sub-genre and historiographic

tendency may be found in *Romances of the archive in contemporary British fiction* (2001).

³ Residual forms, which aim at historical accuracy and employ traditional narrative strategies, are exemplified by Patrick O’Brian’s Aubrey/Maturin series, Adam Thorpe’s *Ulverton* (1992), or Pat Barker’s *Regeneration* (1991). However, in Keen’s opinion, it is women’s historical romances in the tradition of Mary Renault or Margaret Mitchell that dominate the present literary production in the genre of the historical novel (Keen 2006).

⁴ E.g., Salman Rushdie’s Indian historical writing (Keen 2006: 174).

⁵ A well-known example, cited in Brooker’s article, are Pat Barker’s First World War novels.

metafiction: while also revisiting the past critically, neo-historical fiction nevertheless operates in the mode of verisimilitude rather in the more self-reflexive mode typical of the postmodern novel (2014: 4–5).

Brooker's survey of the contemporary historical novel ends with a reference to Hilary Mantel as "the most celebrated writer of historical fiction in Britain this [i.e., the twenty-first] century" (2015: 173). Mantel achieved critical recognition and great popular success as the author of the Tudor novels, *Wolf Hall* (2009) and *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012), both winners of the Man Booker Prize in their respective years. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of her accomplishment is the fact that this fiction clearly stands apart from the widespread tendencies found in the recent historical novel that observers hail as experimental or postmodern. It is indeed easier to define her art in negative terms, as Brooker does: her historical fiction is neither metafictional nor revisionist; nor is she given to overt deliberations on the nature of history. Instead, in Brooker's words, "[s]he has revitalized a quite traditional form (and a very traditional subject) of historical fiction" (2015: 174).⁶ Nonetheless, significant differences exist between Mantel's novels, which conform to realism as a founding Scottian principle of historical fiction, and contemporary historical romances; on the other hand, her fiction cannot be regarded as a belated, derivative imitation of the Waverley novels. In his article, Brooker also cites David Mitchell's *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*⁷ (2010) as a historical novel comparable with Mantel's writing. *The Thousand Autumns* is less known than *Wolf Hall* or *Bring Up the Bodies*, but has also been noticed: it was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2010 and shortlisted for the 2011 Walter Scott Historical Fiction Prize.⁸ Brooker concludes his overview by speculating that novels such as those by Mantel or Mitchell may be indicative of a new trend in historical writing, which testifies to its continuing vitality.

Whether the novels in question have heralded, and indeed initiated, yet another type of historical novel remains to be seen, but the linking of Mantel's and Mitchell's fiction and the recognition of their originality is an insightful contribution to discussions about the potential of a genre which half a century ago appeared to be exhausted. To paraphrase Ezra Pound's dictum, it may be said that both contemporary practitioners of the genre try to make it new by making it a little old, in contradistinction to the postmodernist formal innovations in recent historical fiction. The remainder of this article will focus on David Mitchell's

⁶ Brooker's assessment of Mantel's novels concurs with Rousselot's definition of the neo-historical novel. An essay on Mantel's novels by Rosario Arias is included in Rousselot's edited volume on neo-historical fiction.

⁷ Afterwards abbreviated to *The Thousand Autumns*.

⁸ This prize was launched in 2010 in order to "celebrate the new resurgence of the genre [Walter Scott] created" (<https://www.walterscottprize.co.uk>).

novel – rather than the more often analysed books by Mantel – in order to define the singularity of this new incarnation of the historical novel at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

2. A foreign country in David Mitchell's fictional world

David Mitchell established his distinctive mode of writing with the publication of his first novel, *Ghostwritten* (1999). This novel, like the majority of his subsequent fiction (*number9dream* (2001), *Cloud Atlas* (2004), *The Bone Clocks* (2014), and *Slade House* (2015)) is structured as an assemblage of intersecting and interrelated narratives which project multiple temporal and spatial settings,⁹ resulting in the paradoxical effect of simultaneous fragmentation and integrity. The structural disparity characteristic of Mitchell's fiction is paralleled by a wide range of genres and styles, which he employs with remarkable skill. Mitchell's fictional universe has been compared to an interconnected web, or archive (Boulter 2011: 112); the writer's own recognition that his *oeuvre* is shaping itself into a macronovel (quoted in Dillon 2011: 5) is confirmed by numerous authorial cross-references. The repetition of motifs, phrases, themes, characters, and plots may be observed both within and between particular novels. *Ghostwritten* is narrated by a spectral consciousness, transmigrating between voices, times, and spaces and embodying itself by turns in the protagonists of the nine separate but mutually reverberating stories which constitute the novel. "Character migration" (Dillon 2011: 7), although in a metatextual rather than metaphysical mode, occurs in and between other Mitchell novels, too.¹⁰

As a fairly traditional narrative, *The Thousand Autumns* is strikingly dissimilar from Mitchell's both previous and subsequent fiction, which appears to confirm the hypothesis that the contemporary historical novel is more amenable to habitual forms of story-telling, even in the hands of an otherwise experimental writer.¹¹ Mitchell's historical novel eschews the temporal and spatial

⁹ Taking into account the global range of Mitchell's settings, Berthold Schoene-Harwood analyses his fiction as representative of a genre which he calls "the cosmopolitan novel" (2009: 97–124). Some critics employ Gilles Deleuze's notion of the rhizome to discuss the networks of interconnected stories in Mitchell's fiction (cf. Dillon 2001: 5).

¹⁰ Jonathan Boulter notes that the structure of *Ghostwritten*, which Mitchell to some extent replicates in his other novels, may be treated as "a metanarrative reflection" since an author is in fact "a sort of noncorpum" inhabiting different minds (2011: 109).

¹¹ The novel remains Mitchell's only venture into the realm of historical fiction, apart from two component narratives in *Cloud Atlas*. His fiction is typically located in the contemporary, technology-dominated world, or indeed projects a futuristic vision (e.g., "An Orison of Sonmi-451", "Sloosha's Crossin' an' Ev'rythin' After" in *Cloud Atlas*, "An Horologist's Labyrinth" and "Sheep's Head" in *The Bone Clocks*). Mitchell's latest book, *From Me Flows*

fragmentariness which has become a hallmark of his fiction; it is also his first novel written in the third person.¹² Michiko Kakutani (2010) concluded that, after the “virtuosic literary fireworks” of his previous novels, Mitchell had proved himself to be equally accomplished as a traditional storyteller.

The Thousand Autumns has baffled reviewers, who tend to see it as Mitchell’s retreat from his experimental and playfully exuberant mode of writing to a relatively old-fashioned, realist mode, or regard the display of his craftsmanship as an attempt at postmodern pastiche. James Wood comments on the novel’s “mystifying” and “contrived” aspect while labelling it “a conventional historical novel”, illustrative of the “late-postmodern” era in which we supposedly live (2010). Dave Eggers describes *The Thousand Autumns* as “a straight-up, linear, third-person historical novel” and concludes that “[p]ostmodern it’s not” (2010). Ron Charles expresses his surprise that “the novelist who’s been showing us the future of fiction has published a classic, old-fashioned tale” with an atmosphere redolent of “those grand 19th-century epics by Melville, Dumas and Sir Walter Scott” (2010).

It is indeed difficult to avoid mentioning Walter Scott even in discussions of twenty-first century historical novels. But if Mitchell’s book is not postmodern, it certainly does not read like nineteenth-century historical novels; the writer’s use of the genre entails its replenishment rather than exhaustion. To evoke Fleishman’s conjecture, *The Thousand Autumns* negotiates a way beyond both experiment and a sterile repetition of an old form.

The novel is set in Edo-era Japan, at the turn of the nineteenth century.¹³ Almost all the action spans just over a year, from 1799 to 1800; in the two brief chapters at the end the story leaps forward to 1811 and 1817, respectively. Except for the last chapter, which takes place in The Netherlands, the setting is Dejima, a tiny Dutch trading post off the coast of Nagasaki, as well as several Japanese locations in the vicinity. During this period of Japan’s self-imposed closure from the outside world, contacts between the Dutch and the Japanese are very limited and subject to strict regulations. The eponymous protagonist is a young Dutch clerk, who has travelled to the Orient to make a fortune so as to be able to marry

What You Call Time (2016) is a contribution to the Future Library project and is not to be made available to readers until 2114.

¹² However, *The Thousand Autumns* is not excluded from Mitchell’s self-referential “macronovel” insofar as at least three of its characters may be found in other novels of his authorship: Dr Marinus reappears in *The Bone Clocks* and in *Slade House*; the young midshipman Boerhaave and the first mate Con Twomey may be traced back to *Ghostwritten*. As Dillon observes (2011: 21), not only actual characters but character types tend to recur in Mitchell’s fiction; e.g. the old herbalist in *The Thousand Autumns* resembles the tea lady from *Ghostwritten*.

¹³ *The Thousand Autumns* is not the only novel by Mitchell with a Japanese setting – *number9dream* as well as two of the stories in *Ghostwritten* are set in contemporary Japan.

his beloved. However, hardly anything goes as he intended. He falls in love with a Japanese female doctor Orito, who remains forever inaccessible, but as he tries to arrange her rescue after she is locked up in a sinister monastery governed by a powerful local dignitary, he and several Japanese become entangled in a dangerous sequence of power struggles, betrayals and revenge. In his professional life, the fastidious and high-principled clerk sets the Company's records in order, exposing cases of corruption and underhand dealings, which earns him the respect of some and the resentment of others, and for some time thwarts his career. Due to the collapse of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the turbulence in Europe at the time of the Napoleonic wars, Jacob stays in Dejima for eighteen rather than the expected five years. Apart from the main story of Jacob de Zoet, the novel comprises a number of other, subsidiary stories, tangentially linked to his. The plurality of stories and themes (East-West relations, the status of science and religion, the clash between tradition and modernity, the relations between cultures, etc.¹⁴) is handled by the writer with remarkable dexterity.¹⁵

In his essay "On historical fiction", published as an appendage to *The Thousand Autumns*, Mitchell suggests that the primary reason for writing a historical novel is the pleasure of "the painstaking reconstruction of a lost world":

The historical novelist must learn how the vast gamut of human needs was met in the 'destination period': how were rooms lit and heated? How were meals prepared, clothes made, bodies bathed (or not), feet shod, distances covered, transgressions punished, illnesses explained, courtships conducted, contraception considered, divinities worshipped and corpses disposed of? (Mitchell 2011b: 558)

Mitchell evokes Scott's pioneering attempt at combining a captivating story with historical accuracy (2011b: 557); despite the often questionable status of verisimilitude in the Waverley novels, the Scottish writer's objectives remain valid signposts for historical novelists.

In the best Scottian fashion, "local colour" is rendered by Mitchell in meticulous detail, with the particularities of time and place vitally connected with the events and capable of enabling the reader to visualise the exoticism of this

¹⁴ In his discussion of the novel, Gerd Bayer foregrounds the issue of colonialism. However, his contention that "the overall direction of *Jacob de Zoet* certainly invites readers to reflect critically on the crooked and immoral nature of the European project of colonisation in late eighteenth-century Japan" (2014: 106) appears unfounded, not least because Japan was not a European colony, and the relations between the Dutch and the Japanese in the novel are by no means those between the colonisers and the colonised.

¹⁵ It may be relevant to note here that the temporal setting of *The Thousand Autumns* corresponds to the time when the historical novel came into being. Georg Lukács argues that nineteenth-century historicism had its roots in the heightened awareness of historical change, brought about by the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars (1963: 23).

remote setting.¹⁶ The adoption of the characters' perspective lends both immediacy and authenticity to the accounts. During his first, carefully guarded visit to the mainland, Jacob catches a rare glimpse of Nagasaki through the grille of the palanquin in which he and his Dutch superior are carried to the Magistracy, three feet over the forbidden Japanese ground. He registers the sights, sounds, and smells of the place: "Hawkers cry, beggars implore, tinkers clang pangs, ten thousand wooden clogs knock against flagstones. ... he smells steamed rice, sewage, incense, lemons, sawdust, yeast and rotting seaweed. He glimpses gnarled old women, pocked monks, unmarried girls with blackened teeth" (Mitchell 2011a: 44¹⁷). The details also serve the purpose of weaving into the novel "the wider fabric of colonial history, science, trade and travel writing" (Larsonneur 2015: 140). Above all, the meticulous, at times sensual, evocation of the material reality must be seen as part of Mitchell's historical methodology (Beville 2016).

If, as L. P. Hartley put it, the past is a foreign country, this past is doubly foreign, but Mitchell conscientiously responded to the challenge of reconstructing it. The inspiration for the novel came from the writer accidentally stumbling upon the Dejima museum during his stay in Japan in 1994: "I filled a notebook with information about this place I'd never heard of and resolved one day to write about it" (quoted in Simon 2010). The writing of the novel was preceded and accompanied by a study of historical facts about Japan and Dejima at the end of the eighteenth century (which the writer calls "hard research"), as well as an exploration of the intricacies of daily life ("soft research"). One of the main sources was the autobiography of Hendrik Doeff, on whom Jacob de Zoet is loosely modelled. Like his fictional counterpart, Doeff arrived in Dejima as a young clerk in July 1799. He remained there until 1817, having in the meantime been promoted to Chief of the post and having successfully defended the site against British attempts to take over the European trade with Japan (Larsonneur 2016: 25).¹⁸ Mitchell, by his own admission, went through a great deal of archival

¹⁶ Bayer claims that "the novel's intensive investment in non-European localities and cultures can be read as a gesture that acknowledges the lasting attraction of the 'exotic' for European readers" (2014: 111). It must be observed, however, that the Japanese setting is exotic primarily to the European characters in the novel, whereas the late eighteenth-century European characters are equally exotic to the contemporary reader. Hence, in my view, the overall aim of the meticulous rendition of the setting is not to exoticise Japan but to convey the otherness of the past.

¹⁷ Subsequent references to the novel will be by page numbers.

¹⁸ Doeff's memoirs were published in Dutch in 1833, and translated into English in 2003. Claire Larsonneur indicates several other sources on which *The Thousand Autumns* is based; one of them is an account of a journey to Japan by Philipp Franz Balthasar von Siebold, subsequently a doctor in Dejima, whose daughter by a Japanese concubine became the first Japanese female doctor — an inspiration for the character of Orito (2016: 26–27).

material and consulted experts – in the Acknowledgements section, the writer lists numerous institutions and individuals who assisted him in grounding his fiction in a plausible factual dimension. As he says in his essay, “the ‘historical’ half demands fidelity to the past” (2011b: 560).

Yet, despite the thorough research that went into the writing of the novel, *The Thousand Autumns* is not a “romance of the archive”. The process of exploring the legacy of the past is kept outside the fictional world. In contrast to a number of late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century historical novels, there is no scholar, detective or any other fictional character struggling to reconstruct the true version of the past, in imitation of the writer’s own efforts.¹⁹ Nor is the inevitable inaccessibility of the past overtly problematised in the novel. Again, in marked contrast to the self-reflexive mode of historiographic metafiction, the seams that hold together the fictional and the factual fabric are well concealed rather than exposed. Mitchell chose not to display his novelistic workshop to the reader: “The more Moleskins you fill with the fruits of research ..., the more determinedly it must be hidden” (Mitchell 2011b: 558–559). This strategy helps to create the illusion of reality while focusing the reader’s attention on the story itself rather than on the manner of narration or quest for historical accuracy.

In the hands of Mitchell, the historical novel has moved beyond the obvious impediment that the past cannot be adequately represented. While the problem is of course irresoluble, a writer, relying both on the available evidence and his or her imagination, may still create a plausible version of what it was like to be alive in a distant era. Discussing the classical, nineteenth-century form of historical fiction, Georg Lukács asserted: “What matters ... in the historical novel is not the re-telling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events. What matters is that we should re-experience the social and human motives that led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality” (1963: 42). In his own essay Mitchell quotes the American twentieth-century novelist Jessamyn West, who said that “Writing of the past is a resurrection; the past lives in your words...”, and comments: “I like West’s grave tone and her word ‘resurrection’” (2011b: 559–560).

3. Coming alive in the present tense

The novelty and the success of *The Thousand Autumns* reside in the way the writer brings the past back to life. The metaphors of resurrection, or poetic

¹⁹ See, for example, Julian Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984), Peter Ackroyd’s *Hawksmoor* (1985), A. S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1990) and *The Biographer’s Tale* (2001), or Graham Swift’s *Ever After* (1992).

awakening, are given their due primarily thanks to one fundamental decision (which the author shares with Hilary Mantel): to (re)construct the past as if it were still the unfolding present, as if it had not yet happened. The effect of the vitality of the past has been achieved, both in Mantel's and Mitchell's novels, primarily due to the employment of the present tense as the tense of narration. Gérard Genette defines anachronies as "various types of discordance" between the temporal orders of narrative and story (1983: 35–36). In *The Thousand Autumns*, the use of the present tense to narrate events which happened in a distant period creates a major anachrony between the real-life story of history and the narrative in the novel, and consequently serves the purpose of making the future appear still undecided.

Richard Lea in his article "Make it now: The rise of the present tense in fiction", referring, among others, to novels by Mantel and Mitchell, observes that "more and more writers are adopting this way of storytelling to bring immediacy and intimacy to their work" (2015). Mitchell commented on his choice to switch to the present tense: "Some books just come alive in the present tense in a way I feel they don't when told in the past tense. I thought that writing an historical novel in the present tense gave *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* a strange paradox. This already happened a long time ago, yet it's happening now" (quoted in Lea 2015). For her part, Hilary Mantel explained that the present tense seemed a natural choice for capturing "the jitter and flux of events, the texture of them and their ungraspable speed" (quoted in Lea 2015).

To cite Mitchell's own formulation, time is "a primal element" (Harris 2015: 10)²⁰ in his novel. In *The Thousand Autumns* the temporal dimension is persistently emphasised. Regular and ostensible references to clocks punctuate the progress of individual lives and measure history on a microscopic scale. Indications of time occur especially in episodes which depict turning points in the story – the future is unknown, the present contingent and each minute or second may bring about a reversal of fortune. For example, the following passage interweaves dialogue with a character's unspoken thoughts, with the clock almost becoming another character in this momentous exchange:

The Almelo Clock is loud against the drizzle's hush and the lamp's hiss.
 'And,' Jacob keeps his voice flat and steady, 'your plans for me, sir?'
 'You are to be my eyes and ears in Nagasaki, until next trading season.'
Without protection, Jacob considers, *I shall be eaten alive in a week...*
 'I shall, therefore, appoint Peter Fischer as the new head clerk.'
 The clatter of consequences tramples over the Almelo Clock.

²⁰ In an interview with Paul A. Harris about the role of time in fiction, Mitchell said: "time can be seen as a primal element of the narrative, along with character, plot, style, structure and theme, and as such can alter the nature of the narrative itself" (2015: 10).

Without status, Jacob thinks, I shall indeed be a lap-dog, thrown into a bear-pit.
'The sole candidate for Chief,' Vorstensbosch is saying, 'is Mr van Cleef...'
Dejima is a long, long way, Jacob is afraid, from Batavia.
'... but what say you to the sound of Deputy Chief Resident Jacob de Zoet?'
(181–182)

The present is clearly portrayed as malleable; the (slow) passage of time in the course of this conversation corresponds to the sequence of quick readjustments in the protagonist's perception of his situation.

Early in the story, the Chief of Dejima sends an ultimatum to the Shogun, the reply to which will determine the future of the Dutch post in Japan. As the scroll is unrolled with all due ceremony and its sections slowly translated, the anxiety and impatience of the Dutch is paralleled by the sound and sight of a clock: "The grandfather clock is grave and loud. The men are hot and silent" (101), or: "The grandfather clock counts off one minute; two; three..." (103). Since the reply is not entirely satisfactory, the state of uncertainty continues. Before deciding how to proceed in the new circumstances, the Chief gazes at the clock, as if trying to penetrate the mystery of the time to come: "Shall we incur the wrath of our masters in Batavia", Vorstenbosch taps the barometer, 'by accepting this paltry increase and keep Dejima open? Or...' Vorstenbosch strolls to the grandfather clock and scrutinises its venerable dial '... abandon this unprofitable factory and deprive a backward Asian island of its single European ally?'" (170–171).

Each chapter is precisely dated. This may even include the exact hour, such as "A quarter past ten o'clock on the morning of 18th October, 1800" below the title of Chapter XXXII.²¹ The temporal deceleration, which entails a meticulous account of events, gives the action mimetic dramatism.²² This particular chapter, for example, depicts Jacob on the watchtower of Dejima at the moment when he realises that the ship in the harbour is British and not Dutch, as everyone has assumed. The situation requires an immediate reaction, and the rest of this brief chapter conveys the quick succession of Jacob's thoughts and the decisions and movements he immediately makes, as well as the proceedings of an urgent meeting between Japanese and Dutch officials.

In episodes such as this, the present tense helps to capture history in progress. Different opinions are voiced during the meeting in question and its outcome remains to be seen. It is thanks to Jacob's steadfastness that the Dutch determine to resist the British; Jacob also tries to persuade the Japanese to stand by the Dutch

²¹ Patrick O'Donnell suggests that the dating of particular chapters serves to emphasise that history is in fact "an assemblage of minor histories" (2015: 141).

²² In narratological terms, this is "scene", as opposed to "summary". In a scene, as Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan explains, "story-duration and text-duration are conventionally considered identical". A passage written predominantly in dialogue "looks more like a scene from a play than like a segment of a narrative" (1991: 54).

rather than start negotiations with the English captain. By the end of the debate, the Japanese stance is not yet clear. This, as the contemporary reader will know, is in fact another turning point in Dutch history and in the history of Japanese-Western relations. By ending this chapter, like several others, on a cliff-hanger, the novel recreates the sense of suspense and uncertainty that is felt by people caught up in the rapidity of events.

The implications of the writer's renunciation of the customary past-tense narration cannot be overemphasised with regard to *The Thousand Autumns*'s novelty as a work of historical fiction. In her discussion of the genre, Mariadele Boccardi expounds on the intrinsically contradictory nature of the historical novel: being familiar with the outcome of events, the author is situated in a position of privileged knowledge but, while writing about history, he or she has to confront fragmented textual evidence; hence an "imaginative leap" is needed to achieve a "finished representation of the period". As a result, the historical novel combines limited access to the object of representation with the formal benefits of omniscience. For that reason Boccardi contends that the historical novel is "inherently metafictional ... purely by virtue of its being written retrospectively" (2009: 6). It could be pointed out, of course, that not all historical fiction is self-reflexive, and that authors may rely on earlier "finished representations" of the past (e.g., professional historical narratives) rather than unprocessed evidence. Nonetheless, Boccardi is undoubtedly right to indicate a natural (although not inevitable) connection between retrospection and metafictionality. The lack of retrospection in *The Thousand Autumns* is certainly one of the reasons why the author does not overtly resort to metafictional devices. The co-existence of divergent perspectives, the occasional inclusion of episodes showing characters in the act of writing or indeed in the act of analysing or questioning other characters' accounts (e.g., Jacob's report on the falsification of the Company's records) can hardly be said to deviate from traditional narrative practice. Even supposing the above mentioned elements might be viewed as metafictional, they remain unobtrusive enough not to "relativize meaning" or "destabilize the ontology of the fictional world" (Beville 2016).²³

Indeed, the chief reason why many commentators hesitate to call Mitchell a postmodern writer is the plausibility of his well-rounded characters, his "'thick' fictional worlds" (O'Donnell 2015: 5) as well as "the authenticity of personal experience and subjective narratives" in his writing (Beville 2016). A vital strategy for the resurrection of the past, in the work of Mitchell and Mantel alike, is the espousal of an "intimate perspective" (Lea 2015), which consists in telling the story from the point(s) of view of individuals, with the narrator's presence

²³ In her introduction to a collection of essays on Mitchell, Sarah Dillon concurs with the prevailing critical consensus: despite using certain postmodern techniques, he refrains from the typical postmodern scepticism about the adequacy of narrative and language (2011: 18).

kept to a minimum. Narratorial commentary, explanation or generalisations do not appear in *The Thousand Autumns*. Instead, most of the story is focalised through chosen characters, mainly Jacob. The characters may be confused or wrong about their understanding of the historical circumstances, but the paradoxical result of this narrative mode is greater historical accuracy, akin to what Walter Scott tried to achieve. In the words of Lukács, “[the] historical faithfulness in Scott is the authenticity of the historical psychology of his characters, the genuine *hic et nunc* (here and now) of their inner motives and behaviour” (1963: 59–60).

The use of the present tense significantly enhances the effect of the “here and now”. The subjectivity and limitations of the intimate perspective are illustrated by frequent instances of “delayed decoding” – an impressionistic style of narration, which takes account of the gap between a character’s perception and understanding.²⁴ Chapter V records several of Jacob’s errors and belated discoveries:

... A hunchback dwarf stands silhouetted in the white glare of Bony Alley.
Gripped in his hairy hand is a club... no, it is a long joint of bony, bloodied pork. ...
A second figure, momentarily blinded by the warehouse darkness, enters.
His willowy chest is heaving with exertion. (52–53)

Jacob is wrong on all counts – the supposed hunchback is a monkey, running away with a human leg amputated at the Dutch hospital, and the second figure is a woman – and not one of the courtesans, as he subsequently assumes, but a doctor. Jacob makes mistakes not only because the light and distance obscure his vision but also because the true identity of the figures is totally unexpected. Yet, his initial errors are presented as if they were statements of fact; only several seconds later – and several sentences below – are the errors rectified. In other words, it is the character’s gradual comprehension rather than the narrator’s objective knowledge that is the subject of the narrative here.

More often than not, however, the discovery of the truth is much more delayed than this, or indeed may be available only to the reader. The novel abounds in twists and sudden reversals, which take characters and readers alike by surprise owing to the lack of narratorial intrusion and the absence of any prolepsis. When the samurai Ogawa reaches the monastery on Mount Shiranui on a mission to rescue Orito, who is a prisoner there, his realisation that he has been outmanoeuvred and that the mission is a disaster rather than a triumph, comes as a complete surprise both to him and the reader. This is because the account of the expedition, although narrated in the third person, has thus far offered insight only

²⁴ I am using a term coined by Ian Watt in his discussion of this technique in Joseph Conrad’s fiction (1979).

into his mind. Ogawa is also told that the precious gift of the Dutch dictionary, which he passed to Orito on behalf of Jacob de Zoet, in fact sealed her fate – her stepmother, concerned about the foreigner's attentions, sold the young woman to the monastery. Jacob, however, never finds out about the dire consequences of his well-intentioned gesture. Employing strategies such as these, the novel resurrects the past by recreating the experience of having to act with partial, limited knowledge, largely in ignorance of other people's plans and intentions, as well as an imperfect understanding of the larger context.

The gravity of the incidents taking place in the present is yet to be assessed, with the benefit of hindsight. As the time of narration coincides with the time of action, foreknowledge has been strictly precluded. The narrator appears to share the characters' present. If speculations are made about the future, they stem from their subjective, time-bound points of view.²⁵ The fact that their assumptions are never overtly verified by the narrator invests the novel with a great deal of dramatic irony. The reader can appreciate, for example, that the British officer Hovell makes three successive errors when he says: "their much-vaunted Dutch Republic looks set to join Poland in History's dustbin of extinct nations. The British Crown needs Fischers, not Snitkers: men of talent, of vision..." (444). The choice of Fischer could not have been more wrong, as the British soon find out; Dutch sovereignty was restored in 1815 – which is mentioned in the last section of the novel, and the restoration of Poland as a state a hundred years later is outside the scope of the novel, but known to the contemporary reader.

The unsuccessful British attempt to capture Dejima, known as the *Phaeton* incident and re-created in the novel as the *Phoebus* incident,²⁶ is the most important historical event depicted in *The Thousand Autumns*. At this point Mitchell uses simultaneous narration, with the perspective shifting between the main players: the captain of the British ship, Jacob de Zoet as Acting Chief of the Dutch post and the Japanese magistrate responsible for guarding the coast. Naturally, each of the actors in the drama of history has different motives, mistrusts the others and tries to get the better of them, and can only rely on his fragmentary knowledge and tentative grasp of the overall situation. The co-existence of different points of view and the concentration of minor incidents in the account fully demonstrate the erratic and dynamic nature of history: at any point, its course may be determined or altered even

²⁵ Mitchell explained in an interview: "One level to work through is the people who lived there, how the Dutch and the Japanese would see one another, particularly during Napoleonic times, when the ships stopped being able to get through from Batavia [modern-day Jakarta]. What would it have been like to be marooned there, not knowing why the ships had stopped arriving, not knowing why you were cut off the way you were? And then whether you'd ever see home again, or if you'd die in this strange, mystifying, in some ways unfriendly place. So all of these things, through Dejima, are why I wrote the book" (Pierce 2010).

²⁶ The *Phaeton* incident occurred in 1808; Mitchell, however, backdates it to 1800.

by seemingly insignificant details such as the fact that the British captain suffers from attacks of gout during the aborted invasion, that Jacob de Zoet happens to be incorruptible, or that the British have chosen the wrong envoy to negotiate with the Japanese. After the event, Jacob makes a mental record of its consequences, some of which are immediate or fairly predictable in the near future, like the damage to buildings or Dejima's further isolation, and some which are likely to be long-term: "Any Anglo-Japanese accord shall be unthinkable for two or three generations" (507–508).

The Thousand Autumns, like classic historical novels, is predicated on intersections of individual life and history. The protagonist becomes a victim of historical circumstances as he is stranded on Dejima due to the turmoil in Europe but during the British attack he himself unexpectedly affects the course of history. The relinquishment of narratorial explication in the novel allows for the smooth and seamless integration of the personal and fictional on the one hand, and the public and the historical on the other. Lukács remarked that Scott "presents history as a series of great crises" (1963: 53), showing realistically how human beings act under particular circumstances. Although in *The Thousand Autumns* the historical background is never presented *in extenso*, but indicated only in so far as it impinges on the characters' lives and their awareness of what is going on, it is clear that this is a critical period for Dejima, the Netherlands, and Japan. The Dutch East India Company, together with its single Japanese outpost, are on the brink of bankruptcy, the Netherlands are controlled by Napoleon and so at this moment the remote Dejima is the last place on earth where the Dutch flag still flies. But it is a time of transition for Japan as well. The changing international situation forces the Japanese to reconsider their policy of isolation, while exposing the inadequacy of Japan's backward-looking feudal system. All these current developments are referred to in the novel, but always fragmentarily, via the characters' thoughts, words, and actions.

It must be noted, however, that one of the five parts departs from the novel's predominant, realistic-factual narrative mode "in terms of genre, setting, and circumstance" (O'Donnell 2015: 135). Part II, "A Mountain Fastness", depicts Orito's imprisonment on Mount Shiranui, her attempts at escape, and Ogawa's heroic rescue mission. By interweaving motifs of romantic love, war, and adventure, a perilous journey, disguise and secrecy, and a quest to save a damsel in distress, the narrative takes on unmistakable features of a romance. In compliance with a tradition going back to Clara Reeve ("The progress of romance"), Walter Scott distinguished between the romance and the novel with regard to the principle of *mimesis*. In "Essay on romance" the Scottish writer defined the former as "a fictitious narrative in prose or verse; the interest of which turns upon marvellous and uncommon incidents" and the latter as "a fictitious narrative, differing from the romance, because the events are accommodated to the ordinary train of human

events and the modern state of society” (1834: 129). Apart from having been shaped according to conventional narrative formulas, Part II of *The Thousand Autumns* includes elements of sensation, mystery, superstition, and gothicism, characteristic of the romance. Assuming that “the historical novel as a genre is... the interplay between invented story elements and historical ones” (Rigney 2001: 19), this section clearly stands out by lacking the factual component. The representation of a clash between science and irrational belief (the sinister cult practised in the monastery), suggestive of “the proliferation of discursive orders in this world perched on the edge of the modern age” (O’Donnell 2015: 138), may be regarded as the only exception²⁷.

4. History as drama

Boccardi argues that the genre of historical fiction operates within a “dual temporal dimension”: “the time of the writing (the present) and the time of the setting (the past)”, with retrospection as its “key formal feature” (2009: 5). The passage of sixty years famously stipulated by the subtitle to *Waverley* affords the necessary distance for the writer to recount and interpret the past in fiction. Boccardi claims that the past tense is the natural choice in narrative: “The use of verbs in the past tense as the basic starting point for the temporal architecture of any narrative is... a convention and artifice designed to imply the meaningful closure of retrospective (i.e. historical) knowledge by mimicking it formally”. The past tense grants events “a degree of fulfilment and inherent significance they would not otherwise possess” (2009: 9). Boccardi observes further that “the past was once as confusing as the present seems now” but it gains comprehensibility and “even aesthetic coherence” from hindsight (2009: 21).

In Mitchell’s novel, the present tense, the multiplicity of subjective perspectives, and the fragmentation of the narrative into dramatic episodes jointly

²⁷ The abbot of Shiranui leads a cult whose members believe that drinking the blood of infants ensures immortality. That the fantasy of immortality is groundless is proved by the abbot’s death at the end of the novel; this eccentric faith is exposed and punished as a monstrous and criminal misconception. Orito, an educated woman committed to fighting superstition, discovers for herself the monks’ mechanisms of deception and the enormity of their crimes. In his analysis of *The Thousand Autumns*, Bayer emphasises the trope of cannibalism, suggesting that Mitchell’s novel echoes the colonialist discourse which often justified its racist imperial ideology through the dehumanisation of the Other as a cannibal (2014: 112–113). While the presence of the evil cult no doubt enhances the exoticism of the setting and by doing so intensifies the gothicism of this section of the novel, the significance of this motif appears overrated in Bayer’s analysis. It must be stressed that in Mitchell’s representation those vile practices are by no means endorsed by Japanese culture; when the truth about the monastery is revealed, the Japanese authorities eradicate the cult. Therefore, Bayer’s conclusions that “the cannibalism at the heart of the Japanese system of power does present that cultural realm as corrupt to the core” (2014: 112) must be regarded as far-fetched.

serve to recreate the confusion of the past when it was still the present. The novel implicitly demonstrates but does not openly reflect on the fact that history has no inherent plot, and that emplotment – as Hayden White persuasively argued in *Metahistory* – is an activity undertaken retrospectively by historians. *The Thousand Autumns* is composed of scenes and brief sequences which, as they unfold, bear no obvious relation to all the other components. In the course of the story, characters follow their own plans and construct their mini-plots, which by turns converge, overlap, intersect, or thwart one another, and are additionally modified by the course of history. The different threads collectively make up the text(ure) of the story, and the fabric of history, but no one in the novel is in a position to see the interconnections and interdependencies in their entirety, while the narrator does not exercise the privilege of foreknowledge. Owing to the multiplicity of what Patrick O'Donnell has called “minor histories” and their contingent relations and unexpected or incomplete resolutions; the novel forgoes any notion of “a grand history operating behind the scenes” (O'Donnell 2015: 126–127).

During her last meeting with Jacob, eleven years after the events depicted in the main story, Orito remarks on the relative clarity that retrospection affords as well as the low agency of individuals in the events which, in retrospect, may appear to have fulfilled a certain purpose: “When pain is vivid, when decisions are keen-edged, we believe that we are the surgeons. But time passes, and one sees the whole more clearly, and now I perceive us as surgical instruments used by the world to excise itself of the Order of Mount Shiranui” (538). Ironically, however, despite the passage of time, her perspective remains very narrow and is centred on an issue which is vital to her but is of no interest to the rest of the world. In the subsequent chapter of the novel, after several more years have elapsed and Jacob has returned to Europe, retrospection covers a larger area and reveals the far wider repercussions of the events described in the previous parts of the novel.

The Japanese board game *Go*, referred to several times in the book, may be taken as a metaphor for the unpredictable processes of history. When, towards the end of the novel, the magistrate of Nagasaki confronts the abbot of Shiranui in what is ostensibly entertainment, but in reality a deadly contest, the former wonders: “Do you ever suspect ... we don't play *Go*, rather *Go* plays us?” (521). To follow on from the notion of game, it may be said that the principal characters in Mitchell's novel indeed turn out to be both players and (more often) pawns.

The metaphor of play may be a clue to the newness of the kind of historical novel that Mitchell has created. The representation of the past as an unfolding present concurs with the concept of the historical process as a complex interplay of diverse factors. This in turn calls for a form which communicates the dynamism of action and the sense of immediacy experienced by its participants, which accounts for the fact that *The Thousand Autumns* hovers between narrative

and drama. Quick cuts from one scene to another, the condensation of the main events to within one year, the prevalence of dialogue over exposition, and, very importantly, the use of the present tense, give the novel a pronounced dramatic quality. The employment of the “intimate perspective” does not diminish this effect, because unspoken thoughts are presented as direct reactions to what is going on “here and now”, whereas the incorrect guesses, mistaken assumptions, quick decisions, and constant readjustments of attitudes all heighten the sense of immediacy.

Writers such as David Mitchell and Hilary Mantel have reanimated the historical novel in the twenty-first century without departing very far from the tenets of the genre as it was established two hundred years ago; they certainly adhere to the demand for verisimilitude in the representation of historical reality, yet avoid the epic, narratorial retrospective sweep of nineteenth-century historical novelists. On the other hand, they have moved beyond metafictionality and postmodernist scepticism. Instead, a literary resurrection of the past, and, at the same time, a reanimation of historical fiction, are attained by incorporating the *hic et nunc* of drama into the narrative mode. With aspects of the postmodernist experiment having been absorbed and already abundantly exploited by the contemporary historical novel, it is this synthesis of drama and narration, or showing and telling, that may indeed turn out to be the new “emergent” type of historical fiction.

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